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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VILNIUS 000540

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SUBJECT: LITHUANIA HOLDS SUB-MINISTERIAL LEVEL DIALOGUE
WITH BELARUS

REF: A. VILNIUS 175 B. VILNIUS 75 C. VILNIUS 442

Classified By: Pol/econ officer Traver Gudie for reasons 1.4 (,d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Subcabinet-level officials from the Lithuanian and Belarusian Foreign Ministries held annual bilateral meetings June 1-3. Discussions focused on the impending increase in visa fees for Belarusians, the closure of Lithuania's consulate in Grodno, and economic and environmental issues. The discussions, which are permitted under the EU's agreed rules of engagement with the Lukashenko regime, mark the importance of ties between the neighboring countries, and Lithuania's commitment to keep working-level relationships with Belarusians alive. End Summary.

Lithuania maintains low-level engagement of Belarus

¶2. (C) Lithuanian Foreign Ministry Undersecretary Albinas Januska and Belarusian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Mikhnevich led their respective delegations in discussions in the Lithuanian seaside town of Palanga on economic, environmental, and consular issues. Newly-appointed Belarus Division Head Gudynas provided a readout of the meetings. He stressed that the annual consultations with Belarus reflect Lithuania's bifurcated Belarus policy. The GOL pursues stronger international condemnation of Lukashenko's regime and support for the Belarusian opposition. At the same time, it nurtures lower-level government contacts to protect the bilateral economic relationship and seek to influence a cadre of officials with Western ideas. Although Belarusian delegates seldom deviate from the party line, Gudynas said, they privately acknowledge Lithuania's success and enjoy shopping in Vilnius's large mall.

Talks Avoided Democracy Issues

¶3. (C) Gudynas said that the consultations avoided sensitive political issues such as Lithuania's support for democracy in Belarus, since both sides are well aware of the other's position. The Belarusian side had proposed as an agenda item and prepared talking points about the European Humanities University, an independent Belarusian University exiled in Vilnius, but did not raise it in the meeting. The talks focused on visa fees, environmental concerns such as the pollution of the Nemunas river that flows from Belarus to Lithuania, outstanding commercial claims, and cargo transit between the two countries. (Note: Belarusian trade accounts for about one-quarter of the volume at Lithuania's major port, Klaipeda.)

¶4. (C) Gudynas told us that his appointment in May to the previously vacant post heading the MFA's Belarus Division effectively splits the Belarus portfolio between him and Renatas Juska of the Foreign Policy Analysis Department, the MFA's de facto lead on Belarus. Gudynas will handle official contacts with the Belarusian government, a task for which he previously had responsibility in an Interior Ministry post. Juska will continue handling what Gudynas called the "underground work," contacts with Belarusian opposition members, training for youth activists, and information dissemination programs in Belarus. This arrangement insulates Lithuania's low-level diplomatic contacts with Belarus, he argued, from its more aggressive pro-democracy tactics.

MFA: Rising visa fees will isolate Belarusian people

¶5. (C) Both Belarusian and Lithuanian officials fear that a visa fee increase following Lithuania's anticipated entry into the Schengen zone (probably in January 2007) will effectively shut Lithuania's border to most Belarusians. The harmonized Schengen fee of 60 euros is prohibitively expensive, Gudynas said, to Belarusians wanting to take the four-hour train to Vilnius to go shopping, attend courses at EHU, or participate in international conferences. The GOL worries that "people-to-people contact" between Belarusians and other Europeans will fall dramatically, hurting efforts to foster democracy. Since Lithuania reduced the visa fee from 20 to five euros, travel of Belarusians to Lithuania

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more than doubled, he said.

¶6. (C) Despite the GOL's attempts to lobby European partners (refs A and B), Lithuania accepts that there will be no general exception from Schengen rules for Belarus. The GOL intends to appeal for exceptions for students, NGO members on business, those living within 50 km of the border, and first-time visitors to the EU. The increase in visa fees and other Schengen rules are prompting Lithuania to close its consulate in Grodno, and the sides discussed practical questions about the property's disposal and moving consular services and personnel to Minsk. Gudynas told us he was pleasantly surprised that the Belarusian delegation also supported exceptions to the rise in visa fees, although they will have little influence on any decision.

Lithuania to Increase Support for Civil Society in Belarus

¶7. (C) Although the GOL did not raise civil society at the bilateral consultations, Gudynas said that the MFA intended to step up its support for broad, "not necessarily political" civil society programs in Belarus. Much of Lithuania's 500,000 euros in assistance to Belarus leading up to the March elections paid for opposition efforts, like distribution of pro-opposition information and non-violent resistance training for youth groups. "Now," said Gudynas, "we want to try harder to support civil society going from the bottom up, since we cannot do it top down." One mechanism the GOL hopes to use is the proposed European Democracy Fund, which Lithuania pushed during the May 3 Community for Democratic Choice summit in Vilnius (ref C). Lithuania has pledged 100,000 litas (\$37,000) to the fund, which would give grants to support NGOs and civil society in Eastern Europe, and is looking for commitments from other partners. Gudynas said that Lithuania has secured informal pledges from five other countries to support the Fund. The MFA hopes to host a conference in Fall 2006 to solicit donations and nominate the Fund's board.

Comment

18. (C) The appointment of a new official to the MFA's Belarus Division and plans to redirect Lithuania's assistance to Belarus suggest that Lithuania's dualistic (or, less generously, schizophrenic) approach to its authoritarian neighbor is entering a less confrontational phase. Our take is that this reflects the GOL's recognition that Lukashenko has survived the risks posed by the elections last March and is likely to remain in power for some time. Lithuania's strategic interest in a democratic Belarus is unchanged, but its policy of periodic engagement remains in place.
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